

State of transportation construction

End-of-year update on road-and-rail projects in Central Texas.

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State transportation officials — frustrated at legislative resistance to private tollways — have been rattling financial sabers recently, forecasting a dreary near-future when all the money for new highway construction dries up.

But you'd never know it in Central Texas, which has been a transportation boomtown for most of this decade. There were plenty of choices for Getting There's annual end-of-the-year construction updates: miles of toll roads still under construction, a commuter rail line moving toward completion, continuing progress on a new — and critical — western Williamson County highway and many more that there wasn't space to highlight here.

Counting the toll roads that opened in the past year, as well as those under construction or planned, and the almost 28 new miles of Ronald Reagan Boulevard under way, that's about 140 miles of new or expanded highways. Or about seven MoPac Boulevards.

Austin still has its traffic problems, plenty of them, some of them caused by construction but most of them due to you, and you, and you, and all those cars around you. And maybe, if Congress or the Legislature doesn't do something significant soon to raise money or let the private sector loose, road building really will grind to a halt. But for now, the barrels are up, the dirt is flying, and the concrete is drying.

Here's a look at the major work going on in and not so far from Austin.

Texas 130

Project: A four-lane tollway from Interstate 35 north of Georgetown to U.S. 183 at Mustang Ridge, with discontinuous frontage roads.

Length: 49 miles

Projected cost: \$1.5 billion

Start: September 2003

Estimated completion: April 2008

Progress this year: After the first 28.8 miles (Interstate 35 to U.S. 290) opened in late 2006, the next 11.5 miles (U.S. 290 to Texas 71) opened Sept. 6. A flyover bridge at U.S. 290 opened in March, and another one at U.S. 71 should open by April. Work on the final section south of Texas 71 is mostly complete, with a spring opening scheduled.

Texas 45 Southeast

Project: A four-lane tollway between Interstate 35 and the U.S. 183/Texas 130 junction at Mustang Ridge, with discontinuous frontage roads.

Length: 7.4 miles

Projected cost: \$220 million

Start: July 2007

Estimated completion: Early 2009

Progress this year: Began work on interchanges at Interstate 35 and U.S. 183, finished 90 percent of necessary earth moving on project and started work on some bridge structures.

Commuter Rail Line

Project: Passenger line (on existing track primarily) between downtown Austin and Leander, with nine stations and new siding track.

Length: 32 miles

Projected cost: \$120 million to \$130 million

Start: Early 2005

Estimated completion: Fall 2008

Progress this year: Substantial work done on overpass at Union Pacific line; completed or nearing completion of six station platforms and began station canopy construction; received four of six rail cars and began on-rail testing on one of the cars; completed siding track at four locations; began installing dispatch control system.

Cesar Chavez Street

Project: Convert one-way section through downtown Austin to two-way, adding medians and brick crosswalks, improving streetscape and slope to hike-and-bike trail with esplanade, trees, benches and retaining wall.

Length: Five blocks, between San Antonio and Brazos streets.

Projected cost: \$6.8 million

Start: November 2007

Estimated completion: April 2008

Progress this year: Work under way on trail and landscaping of slopes

Ronald Reagan Boulevard

Project: Extend Parmer – to be named for the former president north of RM 1431 – as a four-lane divided road between RM 1431 and Texas 29, and a mixture of two and four lanes between Texas 29 and Interstate 35.

Length: 27.9 miles

Projected cost: \$89 million

Start: Spring 2003

Estimated completion: June 2008 for the stretch between RM 2243 and RM 2338 (the section from RM 1431 to RM 2243 was completed in 2006). The remaining 11.2 miles (\$44 million of the cost) is still being designed, with estimated completion in 2010.

Progress this year: Completed most of road to FM 3405, though work continues on one divided section north of RM 2243. Paving in progress from FM 3405 to RM 2338 (Williams Drive) to be completed by summer. Road should be done to Texas 195 by mid-2010 and to Interstate 35 by late 2011.

U.S. 290 West

Project: Widen from four lanes to five lanes with improved shoulders between RM 12 and just west of Canyonwood Drive (east of Dripping Springs), part of a several-step project to widen U.S. 290 to five lanes from Oak Hill to Dripping Springs.

Length: 2.7 miles

Projected cost: \$6.3 million

Start: November 2007

Estimated completion: Summer 2009

Progress this year: Temporarily made road three lanes with striping and began clearing work on other side to widen the road. (A separate \$13 million, four-lane to five-lane widening project from Nutty Brown Road east for two miles was scheduled to begin sometime in mid-2008, before the Texas Department of Transportation announced a contracting freeze.)

Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard

Project: Reconstruct street between Pearl Street and Lamar Boulevard, replacing water, wastewater and storm sewer lines, as well as some utility lines on connecting streets.

Length: 1,700 feet

Projected cost: \$6.5 million

Start: Dec. 29

Estimated completion: Late October 2008

Progress this year: Just setting up traffic and erosion controls. Street work should begin early in January.

University Boulevard/Chandler Road

Project: Extend University Boulevard (west of Texas 130) and Chandler Road (east of Texas 130) from west of FM 1460 to Texas 95, with two lanes from FM 1460 to FM 1660 and four lanes east to Texas 95.

Length: 14.8 miles

Projected cost: \$28.8 million

Start: August 2003

Estimated completion: To be determined for final section from FM 1660 to Texas 95, which has not begun construction.

Progress this year: Opened section from County Road 110 to FM 1660 earlier this month.



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